

City kicks off 'Stop Trashing Houston' plan

"Stop Trashing Houston" is a phrase that may soon become as catchy as "Don't Mess with Beginning" next month, people who illegally dump trash or prematurely set out heavy trash will face harsher consequences as part of Mayor Bill White's campaign, "Stop Trashing Houston." Violators will be ticketed without warning and run the risk of hidden cameras taking photos of their faces and license plates, "not to mention" reprimanding them verbally: "Stop. This is the Houston Police Department. Illegal dumping is a crime. We have your picture. Stop trashing Houston."

The process was demonstrated Oct. 13 at the campaign's kickoff at Tidwell Park, 9720 Spaulding St. White led a large crowd of city officials and residents to a makeshift dump site, complete with a dirty yellow sofa, trash bags and a worn pair of shoes. When the camera attached to a flagpole detected motion, it blared its message. The crowd, which included District C City Councilwoman Carol Galloway and Robert Litke, director of the city's Planning and Development Department, clapped their hands and talked about how illegal dumpers would react when the faceless voice screams out in the middle of the night. "Illegal dumping is like a cancer working at the pride of a community," White said. "I have a plan that will not last just 30 days, but will last until we solve the problem." Joining forces are the Houston Police Department, the Solid Waste Management Department, municipal courts and the Citizens Assistance Office in response to the mayor's plan to strengthen city ordinances.

"We are going to make it tougher on people who trash Houston. We want the community to know we are serious about protecting neighborhoods from these conditions," White said. Currently, violators are issued a warning before receiving a citation, but a new "zero tolerance" policy will enable the immediate issuing of tickets. A \$250,000 grant from the Houston Galveston Area Council will allow the city to purchase about a dozen cameras to catch violators on film. Cameras will be placed in undisclosed locations of known dumping sites and periodically moved, explained Patrick Trahan, a spokesman for White. The money also will be used for education and public service announcements.

People who put heavy trash out before and after the allotted window of time will be fined \$50 and \$2,000. Subsequent convictions will carry a penalty beginning at \$250. "One person's heavy trash is another person's eyesore," White said. White also promised to better address issues regarding abandoned properties and weeded lots. After presenting the mayor with the check, Jack Steele, executive director of the Houston Galveston Area Council, said his organization's goal was to improve communities. "We care about our communities, and part of that caring is treating our communities and our neighborhoods right," he said. "We want our communities to look good. We want to live in clean communities."

Jackie Mayhorn, president of the East Little York-Homestead Super Neighborhood Council, said tougher ordinances will help galvanize the community's ongoing efforts to clean esplanades and weeded lots. "We're no longer going to sit back and let the community be dumped on," she said. "I'm excited about zero tolerance. Where's my

badge because I'm ready to write tickets, too." Reminding the community of the super neighborhood's program that uses walk-on probationers to clean and weed, Mayhorn encouraged citizens to report to the First Missionary Baptist Church, 10933 Maple Leaf St., each Saturday from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. to help. "Give us some support out there," she added. "We will not give up on our dreams."

Ruth Hurst of the Keep Houston Beautiful organization encouraged residents to become familiar with police officers from Differential Response Teams and keep them informed of suspicious activity. The "Stop Trashing Houston" campaign, which captures that slogan inside a green octagon resembling a stop sign, will be advertised inside utility bills and billboards, White said. Citizens who see illegal dumpers should take their pictures and report the violations to the city, he said, adding that identities can be kept confidential. Following the campaign's kickoff, city officials spoke to residents regarding problematic dumping sites and began writing tickets.